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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses reasons why few journalism professors are personally confronting the news media with criticism or praise. One of the primary reasons for this is that journalism professors may fear retribution or keep inbred ties with the media or be following academic tradition. A survey was conducted in Spring 1975 for this report. The survey was sent to the chairpersons of departments listed in the "Journalism Educator" directory issue. Some of the major questions asked were: "What does your department do in the area of media criticism? Do you monitor the media in some regular way? and do you cooperate with the media in some sort of critical evaluation service?" The survey located few professors personally confronting the mass media. Some of the activities reported by the departments included contests and journalism reviews. Only one case where professors took a direct and active position in media criticism was found in the survey. It is argued that there may be lessons to be learned from the way journalism departments relate to high schools and to community colleges. (TS)

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THE LIMITED ROLE OF JOURNALISM PROFESSORS IN DIRECT MEDIA CRITICISM

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This paper was prepared for a panel discussion on news media appraisal. sponsored by the Mass Communication and Society division of the Association for Education in Journalism, to be held in Ottawa, Canada, August 16-19, 1975. This paper will be revised before publication. Prof. Herbert Altshull, Indiana Universitv, is arranging the papers for publication.

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THE LIMITED ROLE OF JOURNALISM PROFESSORS IN DIRECT MEDIA CRITICISM

Abraham Z. Bass

Very few journalism professors are personally confronting the news media with criticism or praise. This is the finding of a survey conducted for this report. Why? Most journalism professors may fear retribution or keep inbred ties with the media or be following academic tradition.

Media criticism is the marshalling of facts and opinions about the specific and the general performances of the mass media directed toward their improvement. These ideas must be ordered to be meaningful to the mass media managers who are given this advice. The mass media practitioner must be addressed, if the message is to be considered media criticism.

Otherwise, it is purely academic, potshots over a faculty lunch or remarks for students and for colleagues. Even a carefully prepared case study or descriptive report or theoretical construction, if presented only in the classroom or in an academic journal, is not effective media criticism.

Media criticism may be scarce out of a fear of endangering relationships with newspapers and broadcast stations which provide scholarships for current students. jobs for graduates and occasionally grants and buildings for faculty members. Or departments may be wary of causing uneasiness among the professional associations, trade groups and journalistic social organizations which have been cultivated to consider the work of the journalism department to be essential and to support this work financially. psychologically and politically. When the association is a creation and adjunct of the department, professors are leery of criticizing the newspapers and stations which make up the friendly membership.

Professors may be turned off to media criticism, in addition, because the media themselves are turned off. In his response to the survey, David C. Henley reported that when he moved to the University of Wyoming in 1974 to become department chairman. Wyoming publishers told him that "if you want to be successful in your new job, lay off criticizing the state's press." The publishers spoke of loyalty to the press, Henley explained, and since "we provide our students to be their reporters, we must walk the tender line. if you know what I mean."

State newspaper publishers and station owners have direct lines to the legislature, the source of most journalism schools' funding: and legislators also have direct lines to the campus. J. K. Hvistendahl of Iowa State University pointed out in his survey response that "you have some obvious problems of offending the wrong people when you have to get financial support from the legislature."

Not just a fear of budgetary reprisals keeps most journalism professors away from media criticism. There is also the old-friends syndrome. Many professors come into journalism teaching after working for a newspaper, wire service or broadcast station. Sometimes it was taking a part-time teaching slot that led to the changeover. Or maybe it was a midcareer change. But these people in many ways still consider themselves bound by the rules of the shop: An employee may beef with his fellow employees, but he does not criticize management in a public forum. The professional-turned-professor may find it difficult to criticize his former employer and colleagues.

In addition, faculty members are operating under a set of rules which does not give media criticism very high standings. In the academic environment, the professor must make his research acceptable to the standards of his academic peers in other departments, who make the judgments in many cases when it comes to promotions and tenure. Looking at professional activity with a critical eye and talking directly with the professionals do not win plaudits in university personnel committee hearings.

Popularly written material, however critical, suitable for inclusion in a newspaper or local magazine or one of the journalism trade publications or organizational magazines, does not count as an academic refereed publication. Traditionally, academic writing is for other scholars and not for practitioners, and certainly not for the general public.

So many professors choose other research paths than media criticism, because research committees and foundations have other priorities. In addition, the heritage from reporting and editing days of detachment leads many professors to choose to stay personally noninvolved in the affairs of the organizations they have under scrutiny. Plus there is the classroom. With the current teaching load, wrote Robert H. McGaughey III of Murray State, "We don't have the time to critique the media."

To find out what professors and departments were doing, a survey was conducted in Spring 1975 expressly for this report. A letter was mailed to the chairmen of the 197 departments listed in the Journalism Educator directory issue. The 33 replies, in general, came from the larger departments with national reputations. If these departments had so little to report, perhaps those that chose not to reply had even less.

Addressed as "Fellow Media Critics," the chairpersons were told that their help was needed "to give your department some national credit for its work in helping the media help themselves." The major question then followed: "What does your department do in the area of media criticism? Do you run contests? Do you run clinics? Do you cooperate with the media in some sort of critical evaluation service? Do you monitor the media in some regular way?" If they provided some form of media criticism, they were asked to send sample reports or more information.

The survey located a few professors personally confronting the mass media. J. Edward Gerald of Minnesota was a founding member and the first secretary of the Minnesota Press Council, which has been widely acclaimed as a model for channeling media attacks into constructive criticism and resolution. Walter Brovald, also of Minnesota, prepares a weekly critique of press performance for the Confidential Bulletin of the Minnesota Newspaper Association. In other cases, the department members do not feel free to comment on the work of the organization's members lest the good feelings be lost.

The most ambitious media-criticism project in recent years, the New England Daily Newspaper Survey which produced "Evaluating the Press," operated under a foundation grant at the Journalistic Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts and commandeered assistance from professors throughout the area, although it was spearheaded not by a professor but by Loren Ghiglione, editor and publisher of the Southbridge (Mass.) News.

The New England study is definitely media criticism, as is some research at other universities. Goerge Gerbner of Pennsylvania, for example, has been analysing with a sharply critical eye the efforts of television to create a new concept of society. Others elsewhere are also putting the mass media under scrutiny. But most of the research coming out of journalism departments and schools is not media criticism; it is historical, crosscultural, theoretical, and descriptive, and even occasionally critical, but it is not directed at the media practitioners who can implement the ideas being presented.

Some professors do get an audience, especially when they have been invited to appear. The audience may have its own idea as to what it wants to hear, and some professors may accomodate it to assure the platform. In some cases, invited appearances may be more useful for informing the media about techniques and concepts, rather than criticizing. Oregon reported professors as media consultants, and Maine and Nevada mentioned staff members running seminars, which are a form of group consulting. At the request of state newspapers, Iowa State has a series of regional meetings where "expertise" in newswriting, advertising and photography is dispensed. More formally, Northern Illinois runs extension courses, in cooperation with newspapers and media groups, where generally younger reporters and editors may hear critical evaluations in a classroom setting, and the criticism may or may not reach those media professionals who make the policy decisions.

Another form of invitation to professors is the request by the media to serve as contest judges. These contests involve professors and other judges in examining a stack of entries, sorting, and designating the winners. There is generally no direct contact between professor and professional. What is transferred is a ranking against the standard of performance set by the contest entrants, an award thus based on the status quo. The entrants may get praise, and possibly promotions and payraises, but not tough media criticism. This is one-way grading, with no dialogue developing. In addition, the grading may be tempered when the contest is being run by a department-affiliated organization and for departmental self-promotion.

Sometimes the professors are recruited as contest judges by trade associations looking for independent evaluators. The National Association of Real Estate Boards and the American Gas Association, for example, asked Maryland to judge contests on real estate news and energy questions. Maryland also reported serving as a judges for the Maryland-Delaware-D.C. Press Association, the Public Relations Society of America, the Radio Television News Directors Association, and the black-oriented National Newspaper Association. Other schools reporting contests were East Texas, Kansas,and Tennessee.

These contests do serve a purpose. John Paul Jones of Florida pointed out the newspaper-photographer-of-the-year contest "has sharpened photo-journalism in this state."

Another form of critical review is furnished by journalism reviews. David M. Rubin of New York University is a contributing editor of (MORE). John English of Georgia is a founding co-editor of Media South, a new publication sponsored by the Atlanta Press Club and several chapters of the Society of Professional Journalists/Sigma Delta Chi. Ben Cunningham of Long Beach is the editor of The Review of Southern California Journalism and Michael Emery of Northridge is a contributing editor. The mainly student-written publication is a project of the Long Beach SPJ/SDX chapter. Also student written and student funded, but with some faculty input, are the Texas Journalism Review, Northwestern's Byline,and Kentucky's Lexington Media Review. Feed/back, the Journalism Report and Review for Northern California, is self-described as "a fruitful collaboration of professional newsmen with students and teachers of journalism at San Francisco State University."

In some cases the review is under departmental auspices. But it may still be student written, as, for example, the laboratory newspaper at North Dakota. The Lab Tab is made up of descriptive reports by upperclass students. Or it may be written almost entirely by graduate students, recent graduates and media professionals in the area, as, for example, the Montana Journalism Review, an annual started 18 years ago which claims to be the first journalism review in the United States. In the 1973 and 1974 issues, only one contributor was a Montana professor, and his article was historical and not critical. Or it may be written mainly by free-lance writers and working journalists, as, for example, the Columbia Journalism Review. There have been contributions by professors at other universities, and some Columbia faculty members, but this enterprise does not seem to involve the active regular participation of Columbia professors. The editor is not a professor. Journalism professors have an indirect role in these endeavors.

One case where professors took a direct and active position in media criticism was found in the survey. The Kentucky journalism department --as a department-- spoke out on a local press matter. The department, headed by Bruce H. Westley, publicly found fault with the Lexington Police Department's media liaision officer, who had called local press coverage about a person killed by police in a gunfire exchange "sensationalized" and often "inaccurate." The faculty also criticized the officer for asking the newspapers to wait for a police version instead of rushing into type. The journalism department said that the "reporter's obligation is to sift through the facts as they become available," and noted that the police liaision officer "seems to

have been criticizing the newspapers for doing their job." Here a department took a public stand as media experts to criticize a government agency's media spokesman and to defend the newspapers' staff's professional performance.

Other departments prefer working behind the scenes. From Mississippi, Ronald T. Farrar reported that "this is essentially a rural state with few newspapers and mostly small ones, and what influence we exert comes through personal contact with editors and publishers." Five of the nine state press association directors are Mississippi graduates, he added, "and we maintain active personal associations with a number of journalists in the state," who come in for praise for good performance and also "quite candid" criticism for unfair or sloppy work. From Washington, Alex S. Edelstein admitted that there is often a failure to focus on press failings, but in terms of encouraging the press to evaluate their own performance, "we are doing a lot of quiet one-to-one and faculty-to-media consulting."

In one area there is a convergence of these different forms of media criticism --private discussion, public statements, reviews, contests, and research-- and this area is high school journalism. There may be lessons to be copied from the way journalism departments relate to high schools, and to community colleges, which both provide the future crop of university students. Those journalism departments that have professors involved in high school press associations may be engaged in more media criticism at this level than their work with the professional media, perhaps because the high school press is not professional. The department may also see itself in a superior position, which is a safe place from which to criticize. But just as the university provides high schools with journalism teachers, the university

provides the mass media with reporters and editors. The university journalism department should not see itself as inferior to the professional journalist, but rather should view itself as the source of trained graduates and expert knowledge.

The experience with journalism-graduates-now-high-school-teachers and pre-pre-professional students may be an indication of some forms of media criticism which might work with graduates-now-reporters-and-editors. Many schools and departments of journalism operate in-service training or advanced-degree work, which serve to maintain close personal and professional ties, Some departments issue newsletters or magazines for their high school audience, which occasionally contain meaningful criticism, often in the form of suggestions on how to accomplish certain difficult tasks. Almost all department-run high school groups have contests, with professors included among the judges.

At Northern Illinois, the contest rules were changed in 1974-75 to eliminate certain mechanical attributes, such as the single best headline, and to emphasize creative endeavors, such as in-depth news analysis or interpretation. The emphasis in the news category was now placed in seeking a trend of stories that mattered, that indicated significance. In addition, a more personal form of evaluation was designed for the conference day when the students and their advisers visited the university campus. Evaluators, who were mainly professors, were assigned to just three high schools. They first had to prepare essay-type critiques, neatly typed in advance, and second to meet with each paper's top three editors and adviser for two hours of discussion, all three staffs meeting together for crossfertilization.

This effort to provide lengthy and individualized media criticism, directly to the working staff and the superviser, in a semi-private setting, generated twice the previous number of schools in attendance. Several months later several schools are still corresponding with their evaluators.

Perhaps as professional reporters and editors and their superiors increase their dependence on advice and information from university journalism departments, there will develop an increased mutual trust, and there will be less of a fear of stepping on toes on the part of journalism professors when offering criticism. There may develop a greater willingness to express strong feelings because the basic professor-professional relationship will be friendly and strong. Each side may grow more secure and the mass media managers may not need to use financial support as a means of currying favor. Perhaps a new form of writing critical evaluations will be developed that will be considered as acceptable research by academic colleagues in other departments.

Perhaps more journalism professors will take active roles in direct media criticism as professors learn to speak out publicly, and the news media learn to listen and respond. Journalism professors must engage the practitioners of the field they profess. A wedding, coming out of this engagement, may be occasionally stormy, but will be better than the current overpolite flirtation.

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